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AUTHOR Maris, Mariann
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ABSTRACT

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee writing program is collaborative, not divisionary, as some, such as Jeanne Gunner, have suggested. Three terms are useful in understanding the relationships and ethics governing operations at Wisconsin-Milwaukee: (1) authority and collaboration; (2) hierarchical difference; (3) professional respect. "Authority and collaboration" are combined under one heading because in the writing program at Wisconsin-Milwaukee they function together. Some of the authority normally granted to the writing program administrator is shared with a part-time instructor. This "shared authority" in decision making has been instrumental in the program's successful assessment of more than 1,500 student portfolios each semester for the last 3 years in English 112. There is often an exchange of ideas between part-time staff and the writing administrator before decisions are made. While "Hierarchical differences" do exist--there is nothing, for instance, to keep the program administrator for making decisions about textbooks unilaterally--a spirit of collaboration and cooperation prevails. The smooth functioning of the writing program at Wisconsin-Milwaukee brings up the issue of "professional respect." Should the program administrators committed to cooperation receive the kind of professional recognition that they deserve? The answer is clearly "yes." Yet, professional respect is an issue for writing program administrators as well as for part-time instructors and teaching assistants, all of whom live with uncertainty concerning the survival of their jobs in the face of budget cuts and dropping enrollments. (TB)

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Mariann Maris

March 15, 1995

Collaborative Hierarchy

A paper presented at the March, 1995, 4 'C's Conference
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In an article entitled **"Decentering the WPA"**, Jeanne Gunner asserts that the current model for most composition programs

> **perpetuates the traditional power relationship that exists between the WPA and writing instructors, especially those who do not hold tenure-track appointments, leading to a troubling degree of division---division by rank, according to the traditional academic hierarchy; often division of authority,...and division within writing programs themselves---**

Even though there may be a perception that such divisions of power relationships exist in the writing program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the fact that a non-tenure-track academic staff person is participating in this roundtable today indicates that administration is collaborative not divisionary as Gunner suggests it is. The fact that I am here demonstrates that professional respect and trust take precedence over division. The result is a composition program that is working effectively - especially for students.

Today, in order to give information about how we collaborate at UWM, I will refer to four terms which help me understand our working relationship: A) Authority and Collaboration; B) Hierarchical Difference; and, C) Professional Respect.

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Authority and Collaboration

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I've combined the terms "authority and collaboration" because in writing program administration at UWM, they function together. I share some of the authority normally granted the writing program administrator. I guess you could call it "collaborative authority." This "shared authority" in decision making has been instrumental in our successful assessment of more than 1500 student portfolios each semester for the last three years in English 112.

Note the word "share". The writing program administrator and I often make decisions about how to proceed with certain aspects of the administration of English 112 after we have exchanged ideas and perceptions about a particular issue that requires some action. While we do share authority about certain decisions, especially involving procedure for English 112, I rely on the writing program administrator's scholarship and experience in making decisions that aren't connected to procedural matters. What I bring to a discussion about a particular issue is a "hands on", day-to-day awareness of how the program I coordinate functions; it's a more practical-application-expertise.

To give an example of what I'm talking about: the writing program administrator is involved in decisions about who ought to get awarded teaching assistantships. I am not involved and think it is appropriate that I'm not involved. I recognize that my authority extends to these instructors once they are assigned to teach English 112.

In the interests of time and because the course that I'm coordinator of is quite unique to UWM, I don't plan to offer

specifics about the course. However, our current textbook selection process illustrates how collaborative authority produces results. Certain changes to the recommended titles for English 112 occur every year. There was agreement that the process needed to change for this year's selection and there was discussion of a range of possible changes. An agreed upon procedure for textbook adoption was established and has been implemented. Now, the committee to select texts is accomplishing its goal. In reaching the decision about what modifications the textbook selection process required, I voiced some practical concerns especially as they related to large scale portfolio assessment - limiting the number of recommended titles, for example. The expertise of the writing program administrator brings balance to the discussion where I might sacrifice theory for practicality.

Hierarchical Differences

In textbook selection, as well as other decisions related to English 112, I have attempted to explain that hierarchical differences do exist and what I've been implying is that they support program administration. The important point, however, is that there is collaboration. It could be different. In textbook selection, for example, nothing is written that would prevent the writing program administrator from making decision unilaterally. In the decision to collaborate made by the writing program administration, a process of collaboration begins and that collaboration is practiced at every level-a kind of domino effect. Now, the textbook selection committee because of this

model of "shared authority" also feels important and necessary. Committee members - instructors, as well as students - understand their importance to the process-collaboration from top to bottom. There is an awareness throughout the process that hierarchical differences do exist.

Hierarchical authority when combined with collaboration is open to criticism. Questions about professional respect for composition programs in general are a concern. This issue brings me to the third and final section of my remarks today, that is **"Professional Respect"**. Is there as much credit and as much scholarly recognition involved for writing program administrators, especially those who share authority? Is it true that women do "service work" in the academy while others do more scholarly work? Does it take two women to do the job of one man? While a female writing program administrator spends time involved in key decisions that directly affect students - decisions about hiring part time staff for example - others in the academy are writing and publishing their own work. Should there be more academic recognition of the value of writing program administration in post secondary institutions ? I think so.

The issue is that hierarchical difference combined with the issue of professional respect affects me because of my part time academic staff status. Though I work together effectively with the those involved in the writing program and feel comfortable with that relationship, job security is an issue for me. I resigned a tenured position at a two-year, post-secondary institution in 1979 choosing to be a full-time mom.

When I wanted to return to that position or one similar in 1986, there were no job openings so I signed on as a part-time lecturer at UWM where I have been working since.

My current position which I have held since 1992, is more secure than my lecturer position was so I have survived in this part time status role. In spite of being a survivor, it's hard sometimes to be recognized as capable and still be uncertain about what will happen with funding my position in the next budget -that is, I understand I am more vulnerable when enrollment drops or funds are cut.

Another aspect of hierarchical differences and professional respect involves the part time academic staff that I coordinate. I observe and evaluate TA's and lecturers, involve them in training meetings on assessment, and rely on their willingness to cooperate - often knowing that some of them who are working hard and who ought to be recognized for their efforts will not be rehired for the next semester. Though, as I mentioned earlier, I don't get involved in employment decisions about hiring, it's a difficult position.

Am I more willing to collaborate due to uncertainty about funding for my position? Definitely. A colleague of mine who does have a permanent academic staff appointment recently requested that some of the people who work part time in her program receive a raise. Though I think lecturers work long and hard to meet English 112 portfolio assessment deadlines for minimum salary, I do not see myself as an advocate for higher wages at this time.

Do I have any suggestions for resolution of issues about authority and collaboration, hierarchical differences and professional respect? I wish I did. Some proposals that would offer some kind of employment guarantees to lecturers who have proven themselves has been discussed; however, little action has been taken due to other funding uncertainties. I am very appreciative that I have a position that I is challenging; it is exciting and rewarding to be involved in large scale assessment. Support from an administrator like Alice Gillam who emphasizes collaboration, not division, who shares authority and in so doing helps modify the "traditional power relationship" and decenter writing program administration makes me optimistic about the future of successful writing program administration in spite of some of the concerns I have raised. Thank you.

Mariann Maris
Coordinator, English 112 - Critical Thinking and Writing
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Department of English and Comparative Literature
P.O. Box 413
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201
(414)229-4152
sarim@csd4.csd.uwm.edu